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The Current Women Superintendents in Texas: Still in the Minority

Pauline M. Sampson and Marie Davenport

Introduction

The superintendent is the highest ranking administrator in a school district (Katz, 2005). Despite increasing trends of women advancing in the fields of business and government, the superintendent position in school districts still has relatively few women (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Glass, 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Katz, 2004; Keller, 1999; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). Grogan and Brunner (2005) determined that 18% of the nation's school districts were led by women. This limited percentage of women in the superintendent position is further questioned as the majority of educators are women and it is from this pool of people from which superintendents are primarily selected (Keller, 1999; Skrla, 2000a; Skrla, 2000b).

The purpose of this study was to add to the literature focusing on the characteristics and perceptions of women superintendents through a feminist research construct to determine why there are still few women superintendents and establish recommendations for women aspiring to the top administrative school district positions.

Conceptual Framework

Previous research emphasized several barriers for women seeking a school superintendent position. Some of these barriers included gender bias (Skrla, 2000a), recruiting and hiring practices that favored males and the glass ceiling (Alston, 1999; Banks, 1995; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Galloway, 2006; Jackson, 1999; Ortiz, 2000; Reid, K., 2004; Young & McLeod, 2001), limited networking, poorly positioned career experiences (Vail, 1999; Wolverton & MacDonald, 2001), lack of role models, and women choosing to enter administration later in their careers (Glass, 2000). The framework for this study is examination of women superintendents' views to better understand why the underrepresentation of women superintendents remains low today through the perceptions of women superintendents. Our premise is that there

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is limited research on women in the superintendent position from the women's perspective (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Katz, 2004; Katz, 2006). A feminist approach has also been used to understand the challenges and successes of women superintendents (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2002; Shakeshaft, 1998; Skrla, 2000a; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000).

In Patricia Collins' (1998) article about Julie Laible's understanding of how people should investigate and conduct research, there was a sense that a person needed to be of the same background in order to study an area. Consequently, she would support this research as one of the researchers was a previous women superintendent investigating some of the current issues for women superintendents, while the other was a successful business administrator prior to entering the field of education. Lather (1991) as quoted in Skrla (2000b) further stated that the goal of feminist research is to correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to end the unequal social positions of women. Therefore, feminist research is meant to examine issues relevant to ending women's unequal access to the superintendent position.

Review of Literature

The presentation of the literature details the continuous struggles, barriers and challenges women have faced as they aspire to the school superintendent position as well as while in the superintendent position. First, the number of women superintendents in the United States is presented. This is followed by possible reasons for the low percentages of women superintendents and an expansion on each possible reason.

The Number of Women Superintendents

Before we can address the limited number of women in the superintendent position, we need to identify how many superintendents are women. Grogan and Brunner (2005) determined that 18% of the nation's school districts were led by women. Glass (2000) reported that there were 13,728 superintendents in the United States with 1,984 of them women, or 13.2%. He further elaborated that this percentage was an increase from 6.6% in 1990.

Reasons for Low Percentage of Women Superintendents

The position of superintendent requires practiced communication skills, a well developed sense of purpose for the district, and the ability to handle any situation that arises. Historically, men have held the position. Researchers have examined leadership styles and traits (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1989), recruiting and hiring practices (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000; Tallerico, 2000), demands of the job (Skrla, 2000b), gender bias and the glass ceiling (Carli & Eagly, 2001; Clark, Caffarella & Ingram, 1999; Glass, 2000; Grogan, 2000; Roberts & Davis, 2004; Skrla, 2000a; Valian, 1999), career paths (Glass, 2000; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Tallerico, 2000), and mentoring/networking (Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989). Even though these areas are presented separately in this review, many overlap and impact each other.

Leadership Style/Traits

Since the early 19th century males have dominated the superintendency (Blount, 1998). Leadership styles and traits for superintendents have often been defined by the majority of superintendents who are men (Enomoto, 2000). One possible reason for fewer women in the superintendent position is that leadership style is defined by the skills and traits needed in the position based on current gendered position. This view assumes that women and men lead differently (Skrla, 1999). But many of these views are based on models of current reality which is a male-dominated position (Ely & Myerson, 2003). These views coupled with resistance to change may promote the continuation of a leadership model that emphasizes that men can show aspects of caring, but women leaders must hide this feminine characteristic to be seen as competent. In addition, many school boards are comfortable with a directive leadership style for the school system. Brunner (2000) determined that directive leadership was not as acceptable to women superintendents. Shakeshaft's (1989) examination of leadership styles found that women tended to focus their leadership more on relationships and teaching.

Further, Vail (1999) contended that women were viewed as not being comfortable with power, public scrutiny, and political elicitation of support for themselves. Young and McLeod (2001) examined the types of administrative positions women desired as well as their goals and leadership styles. They found that the support women receive, the administrative role models they observe, and the variety of leadership styles that they are exposed to does impact their decisions to pursue the superintendent position.

Skrla (1999) cited Bradwich and Douvan's work that identified characteristics of femininity and masculinity. Some of the characteristic traits of femininity identified are empathy, supportiveness, dependence, passivity, and nurturance. Masculine traits identified included self-sufficiency, risk taking,

competitiveness, and stoicism. They further elaborated that superintendent job descriptions are geared more to masculine traits with managerial skills and knowledge base that emphasize facilities and finance, which are frequently considered male domains.

Recruiting and Hiring Practices

It is the responsibility of the school board to hire superintendents although professional search firms are frequently hired to help the school boards with the search process (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000). The majority of school boards are composed of males, and search firms are predominately led by retired or current superintendents who are also predominately male. As a result many school boards have recruitment practices in place that are skewed toward male candidates (Tallerico, 2000). An additional concern arises for aspiring women candidates if they are not afforded the same avenue for employment as their male counterparts.

Demands of the Job

The demands of the superintendent's position include many leadership, communicative, and problem-solving skills. Additionally the superintendent position has been identified as a lonely position (Glass, 1993) and women may underestimate the importance of power, prestige, and politics in the position. Skrla (2000b) completed a follow-up study with women who had left the superintendent position to understand their experiences. The former women superintendents expressed how they would perform the role differently related to power, prestige and policies if they were to return to the superintendent position, as well as improvements that could be made for other women superintendents. Myerson and Ely (2003) focused on the work place rather than equal opportunity development of traditional leadership skills for women. Their framework examined organizational principles and practices that would support changes in the way people work. They recommended pilot programs with evaluation pieces that fostered additional changes in the work place directly aimed at women.

Skrla (2000b) identified three components that were inherent in the superintendent position. These three components were power, prestige, and politics. Scott (2003) found that women who were successful in the superintendent position had learned to cope with power, conflict and authority. Reed and Patterson (2007) concurred that successful women superintendents were resilient and focused on opportunities while maintaining a support system of friends and family.

Brunner (2000) also identified power and further offered major themes of silence, style, responsibility, and people. She found that directive leadership was not a style acceptable to women; rather, they needed to follow a more

culturally accepted norm for women. She asserted that women who were successful in positions of power were able to adapt to a female approach to power which included collaboration, inclusion, and consensus building. Her study showed that successful women superintendents were comfortable with shared power. The women acknowledged that because of their positions, most people usually listened to them. However, women superintendents expressed the need to display no emotion when silenced by their male colleagues. Silencing by their male colleagues included being interrupted while speaking, ignoring their comments, or being left out of conversations (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Gender Bias and the Glass Ceiling

For many years, women have faced situations of bias and limited advancements in pursuit of improving their professional standing. One of the reasons identified for the limited advancement was gender bias (Skrla, 2000a). Gender bias is the unequal treatment and expectations of individuals due to societal attitudes based on gender. The superintendent position has been defined by society as best suited for men's actions (Grogan, 2000; Skrla, 2000a). Bjork (2000) cited the superintendency as the most male dominated of professional positions and men are 40 times more likely to advance to the superintendency (Skrla, 1999). Since women are likely to spend more time in the classroom, women are more likely to view the superintendency in terms of instructional leadership (Shakeshaft, 1999), and as a result, women are often channeled into a position (Matthews, 2001) where their expertise is more directly related to curriculum development.

The glass ceiling has been identified by several researchers as a description of women breaking through to the superintendency (Alston, 1999; Banks, 1995; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Galloway, 2006; Jackson, 1999; Ortiz, 2000; Reid, 2004). Roberts and Davis (2004) identified that women and men view the glass ceiling differently. Women see the glass ceiling as a real and exterior barrier while men see it as a perception that is not reality. If it is an exterior barrier then it would require people to advocate against the barrier for change. However, if it is seen as a perception then the burden is placed on the individual's self examination. The "glass ceiling" thus is an important factor that impedes women from ascending to leadership positions (Carli & Eagly, 2001; Clark, Caffarella & Ingram, 1999; Valian, 1999).

Career Path

The main career pathway for ascension to the superintendent position has traditionally been from the high school principal position (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000; Tallericco, 2000). However, Brunner and Grogan (2007) revealed that the career path to the superintendent position for women and men

has been teacher, principal, central office administration, and then the superintendent, but that women spent more time at each position before applying for the superintendent position. Vail (1999) supported the finding that women spent more time in each position and, as a result, women tend to enter the superintendent position at an older age than men. However, Vail's research identified two different career paths for men and women. According to Vail, ascent to the superintendent for males was teacher, high school principal and then superintendent, while for women it was teacher, elementary principal, central office director and then superintendent.

Mentoring/Networking

Mentoring is the act of supporting and helping others. Mentorship for leadership positions has encompassed help from others to obtain a superintendent position as well as constructive counsel while in the position. Gardiner, Enomoto, and Grogan (2000) stated that mentoring would help women as it is associated with power, privilege, and social stratification (p. 188). Other researchers found that women who were successful in gaining access to the superintendent position were well established and had multiple networks (Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico, 2000).

Methodology

This study was an online survey design. The survey instrument was developed based on one of the researcher's own experience as a woman superintendent as well as from themes discovered in the review of literature; and review of national superintendent survey instruments. The survey instrument consisted of three major sections. The first section included demographic information. This section contained current age, age at time of first superintendent position, race, marital status, number of children, location of district (urban, suburban, or rural), number of students served in their current school district, number of years as a classroom teacher, subject taught as a classroom teacher, first administrative position, number of years as a school superintendent, number of districts served as a superintendent, whether served as a mentor to others aspiring to the superintendent position, and whether worked for a female superintendent.

The second section consisted of several statements related to barriers, networking, mentors, leadership characteristics, relationships, and the role of a superintendent and utilized a Likert scale. The last section of the survey included open-ended questions. The open-ended questions allowed the respondent to answer in their own words, which gave the respondents maximum autonomy over their responses (Fink, 2006; Converse & Presser, 1986). The survey was conducted online utilizing Survey Monkey and was sent to all

female public school superintendents in the state of Texas. The list of female superintendents was obtained from the Texas Education Agency.

The purpose of the survey method of research is to collect data from or about people to describe, compare, or explain their knowledge, feelings, values, and behavior (Fink, 2006; Slavin, 1992). In this research the survey was used to determine the beliefs of women superintendents in the state of Texas. Slavin (1992) emphasizes that, "In survey research, the most important tasks are to be sure that the measures being used are reliable and valid, and to be sure that the individuals from whom we receive surveys are representative of all individuals to whom we wish the result to apply" (pg. 62). The inclusion of all women superintendents in the survey for the state of Texas with a return rate of 58% is an acceptable return rate. Two email requests were sent as a follow-up to increase the participation rate. The open-ended questions were coded using a clustering of responses.

Findings

The return rate was 58% ($n = 91$). Women account for 77% of the teachers in Texas (TEA, AEIS Report, 2008). Yet, in the school year 2008–2009 women occupied only 16% of the public school superintendent positions in Texas. From the mid 90's until 2002 women in Texas did make gains in achieving the highest administrative position within a school district from 7.4% in 1995 to 15.5% in 2002, but since 2002 the percentage of Texas women superintendents has vacillated from a high of 16% in 2009 to a low of 13.5% in 2003.

Demographics

The majority of female superintendents in Texas are between 51–60 years old (50%), predominately Caucasian (90.2%), are married (72.8%) with 1–3 children (76.3%), the majority serve as rural superintendents (68.8%) in districts with 500–1,499 students. Many respondents had been classroom teachers for 6–10 years (43.8%). The largest group of female superintendents had been a superintendent for 5–9 years (32.1%) and had served as superintendent in only one school district (74.4%). Most of the respondents had not worked for a female superintendent (62.2%) but had served as a mentor for others aspiring to be a superintendent (82.9%).

Barriers to Obtaining the Superintendency

The second section of the survey contained 14 statements reflecting the respondents' perception of barriers to obtaining the superintendency. A Likert scale was used with four rankings, 1 = important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = not a factor and 4 = don't know. The barrier most often cited as an important factor was that men were perceived as more capable of management

issues such as finance and facilities (48.8%). Two other factors that ranked high as barriers were lack of mobility of family members (45.1%) and family demands/considerations (46.9%). Several barriers identified as “somewhat important” included school boards reluctance to hire women (63.4%), the glass ceiling (54.9%), the perception that women are not strong managers (43.3%), the perception that women will allow emotion to influence administrative decisions (50.5%) and the perception that women are not politically astute (45.1%).

Open-ended Findings

Section three of the survey contained five open-ended questions related to cultural stereotyping of personal and professional abilities, experiences that facilitated or compromised their career path, societal norms for woman’s suitability for the superintendent position, advice to other women aspiring to the superintendent position, and any additional information. The following section describes the participants’ responses.

The Impact of Cultural Stereotyping of Women

Thirty-six of the 71 (51%) individuals who responded to the open-ended questions indicated that there was none to very little impact from cultural stereotyping on their professional or personal abilities. Many respondents did not feel that stereotypical perceptions of women had impacted their ability to obtain or lead as a school superintendent. One respondent stated, “The female superintendents in our region are strong and knowledgeable women who are active players in their districts. It is the strength of these women and the way they handle situations that helps to crack away stereotyping of the position.” Another respondent concurred on women’s strength and ability to obtain the superintendent position, “I think women are perceived as capable and have strengths in areas that males do not. The good old boy system has taken significant hits over the past decade.” A third respondent suggested that she had a personal perception as “I don’t let those (societal gender norms) thoughts enter my mind. I never see myself as a “woman” superintendent: I am a superintendent. Realistically, societal norms have probably influenced perceptions of me. I just never think about that. I have too many other things to tend to than to worry about being a woman. That’s who I am so get out of my way. I’m doing the job.” One woman superintendent also stated that the stereotyping had changed her, “It has helped make me stronger.”

However, of the remaining thirty-five respondents, four specifically mentioned that the “good old boy system” was alive and well. Six respondents mentioned that women were not perceived as strong enough for the position or they were not trusted or supported by male administrators or male school board members. They indicated that this distrust and lack of support made

the job very difficult. Still others mentioned that they had to work harder, make an extreme effort, be very good, and willing to relocate to areas where women leaders were more accepted. In addition, a few of the superintendents commented that cultural stereotyping of women still exists as one stated, "There can be a reduced amount of respect for recommendations from the female superintendent regarding knowledge stereotypically belonging to men." Another woman stated, "I don't think we are making much progress with women in administration other than in large districts." A third woman stated that the good old boy system was established between male board members and male superintendents, "Our mindset to promote men continues especially among male board members." One woman powerfully stated, "I have lost jobs over it."

The women superintendents in this study stated that it is important to develop strong professional relationships and to make time to actively network with other superintendents as well as to build relationships within the community. They also advised women to find a good mentor. Several indicated that knowing all aspects of the job including the financial and policy aspects of the job was invaluable, while several stressed the need to be flexible about location, to be open to relocation and to seek larger districts where some of the responsibilities can be shared.

Experiences that Facilitated or Compromised their Career Path

More women superintendents listed factors that facilitated their careers than identifying factors that compromised their path to becoming a school superintendent. Encouragement and mentorship by their superintendent was the number one reason that the respondents gave for pursuing the career path of school superintendent. It was this encouragement from supportive superintendents who served as mentors that was key to the respondents' successful ascendance to the superintendent's office; the gender of the mentor seemed to be unimportant. In the case of the female mentors, they were seen as role models. One woman superintendent stated, "I worked for a woman superintendent who encouraged me to consider moving to central office and eventually becoming a superintendent." Another stated, "My grandmother was one of the first woman school superintendents in Texas and my mother was a master teacher." One woman found support from her own husband, a fellow superintendent, "My husband, also a superintendent, has been a strong role model for me. Without his knowledge and support, I might never have aspired to become a superintendent or experienced the level of success in the role that I have."

Experiences that facilitated women superintendents' careers included: the opportunity to work in many different positions with many different pro-

grams, encouragement of others, a doctoral degree, and a strong work ethic. One woman stated, "I worked for a great assistant superintendent during my first principal's job. She encouraged me to return to school for my doctorate, and that has opened doors for me." Another woman further stated, "Earning a doctorate seems to be more important for women than men. It certainly helped me."

Although the number of elements that facilitated the women's careers in this study far outnumbered the compromises, respondents did mention some notable factors that compromised their career path: search firms, lack of mobility, and family commitments. The primary compromises that these women superintendents mentioned were family responsibilities, an obligation to their children, and inability to relocate due to family concerns. Several mentioned that search firms did not include women in their search. One woman stated, "Search firms have marketed males. They have convinced the boards that there is a set image for a superintendent, typically geared toward the male applicant."

Women's Suitability for Position

Ten of the 74 who responded believed that societal norms had little or no effect on women's suitability for the superintendent position. However, a majority of the respondents believed that societal norms played a role in their career. Many believed that it is harder for a women to get the superintendent position. Some believed that they had to "work harder to achieve." Others believed that rural districts and school boards were less accepting of women in the superintendent role. One respondent stated, "I do lead with emotions at times. But as long as it is balanced with appropriate logic, there's nothing wrong with it." Another respondent elaborated, "The female superintendents in our region are strong and knowledgeable, women who are active players in their districts."

Advice to Other Women Aspiring to the Superintendent Position

Many of the respondents believed that it is important to develop strong professional relationships and to make time to actively network with other superintendents as well as build community relationships. They also advised women to find a good mentor. One woman suggested, "Network with other superintendents. Know community expectations before applying for a job. Find out who the power-players are in the community. Be visible on campuses and in the community. Hire and retain only the best people." A second woman mentioned, "Find a mentor, become comfortable in assuming leadership roles, stay well informed of policies and procedures, network with other administrators, and strive to keep the welfare of the students as your central

focus in all that you do.” A third woman elaborated, “Build relationships within and outside of the district. Include male counterparts as mentors and use people skills to your advantage.” Lastly, one woman stated, “It’s lonely at the top. Make sure that you form strong professional relationships so that you can problem solve through your networks.”

Several respondents indicated that knowing all aspects of the job including financial and policy aspects were invaluable, while stressing the need to be flexible about relocation. Relocation was suggested as helpful for women to secure the right position or a larger district where some responsibilities can be shared. One respondent stated, “Educate yourself; never stop learning about yourself and other people; stand up for what you believe to be right; have high expectations for yourself and others. Learn everything you can so that you can be as competent as possible. Be visible in your district and volunteer for the tough jobs. Work hard. Be fair. Speak up or listen as needed. Be very knowledgeable on all matters. You have to earn respect. It does not come with the position.” Another woman stated, “Be willing to make the moves—advancement is hard within one district. Be knowledgeable, confident, and personable.”

Additional comments shared by respondents were inspiring for other women leaders, but they also offered cautions as well. One respondent stated, “If we think about who can do the best job regardless of gender or race, it will benefit everyone.” Another woman stated, “Take your job seriously, but not yourself. Be true to your word. Ask the right questions. Trust but verify.” Another respondent described satisfaction with the position, “The superintendent is a wonderful position. Women should try for the position if they desire it, but they need to be prepared for the personal sacrifices, especially the political nature and time involved.” One woman even identified women’s strengths, “Women and men have different strengths. Women should use the strengths they have and not try to behave and lead the way men do. Women are perceptive, intuitive, collaborative, global, and able to think about a number of things at the same time. Those are great strengths for a superintendent, but be sure you want to go down that road. It is tough on families.”

Additional Information

Many women superintendents responded that the job was rewarding and that women needed to be knowledgeable mentors to serve other women in their pursuit of the superintendent position. There was a sense of encouragement that we should continue to showcase what women do. Many stated that persistence was a necessity and we should, “not dwell on societal norms as an excuse for lack of success.” Another woman stated, “Capable women will be able to overcome any barrier-get the experience, gain the knowledge, and learn to use relationships.” Other women encouraged others to strive to ob-

tain the superintendent position. One woman stated, "Believe in yourself, set your goals high, and go after what you want. It will happen." Lastly, a woman encouraged others, "Prove yourself and make way for other women by mentoring them in this role. This will help society to see that women are just as capable as men and many times, more capable in this child-centered business."

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to continue the examination of women superintendents' perceptions of obtaining the position and the current superintendent position through a feminist construct for possible reasons that women superintendents continue to be a low percentage of the superintendents in Texas. This study matched others' findings on the demographics of women superintendents. deCasal and Mulligan (2004) also found that the majority of women superintendents were Caucasian (85%). However, their findings showed that the majority of women superintendents were between the ages of 31 and 45 (deCasal & Mulligan, 2004), whereas our study indicated that the majority of women superintendents in Texas were much older, between 51 and 60. Women's responses from this study reinforce previous research that has been conducted. The qualitative data collected resulted in a rich understanding of barriers, struggles, and reasons for the women superintendents to consider the position. Many women found that mentorship helped them obtain a superintendent position. This finding was similar to several other researchers (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico, 2000). Women also identified strong leadership skills that included feminine traits as important to their obtaining the position. The bias toward women in the superintendent position does seem to be lessening and it appears that personal considerations by women may be as important a factor in the limited number of women who seek the superintendency as is the external factors. This study also suggests that there are women who had not experienced discrimination in obtaining the position or while in the position although most of the women superintendents did believe that there was still male preference with many school boards.

There were many issues explored in the study to explain the disparity in women holding the superintendent position. This study supports the need to further the discourse about issues for this disparity from the women who have moved into the superintendent position. This discourse could lead to developing programs and workshop trainings that will allow school boards and search firms to become more open to actively recruit women for the superintendent position.

Issues of power, politics, and gender continue to be addressed by some women in this study; yet, it is encouraging that others experienced less gender bias. This does suggest progress from the work of other researchers (Brunner, 2000; Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Therefore, the dialogue on beliefs, external and internal barriers, as well as leadership qualities need further consideration in an understanding of feminist research related to women superintendents. It is the women superintendents' ability to understand and share their experiences that will guide and encourage other women to seek the superintendent position. Further, a study on school board's perceptions and search firms of hiring may impact the recruitment of women. It is hoped that this joint experience between the researcher and the participants will encourage an increase in the number of women superintendents in Texas.

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